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Current challenges for small town/localities in the Intermediate Region of Maringá – Paraná

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Abstract

The contemporary context requires urgent and emergent reflections on small towns/localities, especially in the wake of the pandemic. This period from 2020 to 2022 has caused changes that may not yet be sufficiently measured and understood. As a result, new questions have emerged about the direction of urbanization. In this sense, the question which guides this article is to understand what trends can be observed in the reality of small towns/localities related to the advance of this scenario. Guided by this question, the aim of the article was to reflect on the prospects for small towns/localities in the face of contemporary obstacles. In order to accomplish this task, the methodological procedures adopted were a literature review and a survey of socio-economic data from the small towns/localities in the Maringá Intermediate Region. Three sections were developed to systematize the current challenges. Firstly, we reflect on the Brazilian urbanization process and small towns/localities in a context that minimally considers issues brought about by the pandemic. Subsequently, we address the challenges peculiar to geographically peripheral areas. We have tried to analyze this socio-spatial reality with the support of indicators such as GDP per capita, as opposed to the Gini index, which helps to measure socio-spatial inequalities. Finally, we have outlined some perspectives, bringing ideas and considerations from authors who are also looking for ways forward in the face of current challenges. We understand that in the face of new challenges, it seems pertinent to consider that there is potential in small towns/localities that can contribute to the production of a more humane, socially less unequal and environmentally sustainable socio-spatial reality.

Keywords: Intermediate Region of Maringá. Small towns/localities. Peripheral spaces. Brazilian urbanization process. Socio-spatial challenges.

Desafios atuais para as pequenas cidades / localidades da Região Intermediária de Maringá – Paraná

Resumo

O contexto contemporâneo impõe reflexões sobre as pequenas cidades/localidades que se fazem urgentes e emergentes especialmente após período pandêmico. Esse período vivido de 2020 a 2022 provocou alterações talvez ainda não suficientemente mensuradas e compreendidas. A partir disso, emergiram novos questionamentos a respeito dos rumos da urbanização. Nesse sentido, o questionamento que orienta este artigo é compreender quais tendências podem ser observadas na realidade de pequenas cidades/localidades relacionadas ao avanço desse cenário. Norteado por essa questão o artigo teve como objetivo central construir reflexões sobre as perspectivas das pequenas cidades/localidades frente aos obstáculos contemporâneos. Para atender a tal tarefa os procedimentos metodológicos adotados foram a revisão da literatura e o levantamento de dados socioeconômicos das pequenas cidades/localidades da Região Intermediária de Maringá. Ao sistematizar os desafios atuais foram desenvolvidos três itens. No primeiro, refletimos acerca do processo de urbanização brasileiro e as pequenas cidades/localidades em contexto que pondera minimamente questões trazidas pela pandemia. Posteriormente, abordamos os enfrentamentos peculiares a áreas geograficamente periféricas. Procuramos analisar essa realidade socioespacial com o apoio de indicadores como o PIB per capita, contraposto ao índice de Gini que contribui para mensurar as desigualdades socioespaciais. Por fim, esboçamos algumas perspectivas, trazendo ideias considerações de autores que igualmente buscam caminhos frente aos desafios atuais. Compreendemos que diante aos novos desafios parece pertinente considerar que existem potencialidades nas pequenas cidades/localidades que podem contribuir para a produção de uma realidade socioespacial mais humana, socialmente menos desigual e ambientalmente sustentável.

Palavras-chave: Região Intermediária de Maringá. Pequenas cidades/localidades. Espaços periféricos. Processo de urbanização brasileiro. Desafios socioespaciais.

Desafíos actuales de las pequeñas ciudades / localidades de la Región Intermedia de Maringá - Paraná

Resumen

El contexto contemporáneo impone reflexiones acerca de las pequeñas ciudades/localidades que son urgentes y emergentes especialmente después del período pandémico. El período de 2020 a 2022 provocó cambios que quizás aún no fueron suficientemente medidos y comprendidos. A partir de esto, surgieron nuevas preguntas sobre la dirección de la urbanización. En este sentido, la pregunta que orienta este artículo es comprender qué tendencias se pueden observar en la realidad de las pequeñas ciudades/localidades relacionadas con el avance de este escenario. Guiado por esta pregunta, el objetivo central del artículo fue reflexionar acerca de las perspectivas de las pequeñas ciudades/localidades frente a los obstáculos contemporáneos. Para cumplir con esta tarea, los procedimientos metodológicos adoptados fueron una revisión de la literatura y un levantamiento de datos socioeconómicos de pequeñas ciudades/localidades de la Región Intermedia de Maringá. Al sistematizar los desafíos actuales se desarrollaron tres ítems. En el primero, reflexionamos acerca del proceso de urbanización brasileño y las pequeñas ciudades/localidades en un contexto que considera mínimamente las cuestiones provocadas por la pandemia. Posteriormente, abordamos los enfrentamientos propios de zonas geográficamente periféricas. Buscamos analizar la realidad socioespacial con el apoyo de indicadores como el PIB per cápita, contrastado con el índice de Gini, que ayuda a medir las desigualdades socioespaciales. Finalmente, esbozamos algunas perspectivas, aportando ideas a consideraciones de autores que, igualmente, buscan formas de enfrentar los desafíos

actuales. Entendemos que ante los nuevos desafíos parece pertinente considerar que existen potencialidades en las pequeñas ciudades/localidades que pueden contribuir a la producción de una realidad socioespacial más humana, socialmente menos desigual y ambientalmente sostenible.

Palavras-chave: Região Intermediária de Maringá. Pequenas cidades. Espaços periféricos. Desafíos socioespaciales. Perspectivas.

1 Introduction

The inclusion of small towns/localities in the context of Brazilian urbanization has become increasingly challenging. In a world that is becoming more and more spatially concentrated in metropolitan areas and urban agglomerations¹, small towns have become fragile spaces.

This is due to a number of factors: 1) the existing political recognition of small towns has been limited, for mikripolitan² areas, to the way in which they are inserted into the territory, via the municipality, a territorial institution with strong instability in Brazilian federalism, especially when it comes to demographically small and peripheral units; 2) the population exodus, which in some cases is insistent and does not only correspond to the rural population as is claimed; 3) when they are in areas with a strong influence from large or medium-sized urban centers, they suffer interference in a number of ways: they constitute support areas for regional economic activities, serving as logistical supports, cheaper soil for industrial and other purposes, as well as housing space for the lower-income populations. We know we have not listed them all, but we are just pointing out that these areas require further study in order to broaden our understanding of them and make more accurate planning and management decisions.

When we warn the need to focus on this most neglected aspect of the territory, we emphasize that it is not just a question of thinking about economic development, but especially its social aspects. Furthermore, when we analyze the space considering its socio-spatial formation (SANTOS, 1977; SANTOS, 1979) and that it forges peculiarities that become major challenges through constant transformations, we realize that there is a strong link between social aspects and space. Therefore, socio-spatial formation implies spatialized social challenges. In other words, we have socio-spatial challenges.

The contemporary context, therefore, imposes urgent and emerging reflections on small towns/localities, especially after the pandemic. If urbanization continues, which urban settlements could be produced from now on? Will existing trends, largely the result of economic spontaneity, continue to be reproduced, no matter how much we talk and write about planning? Or will the urgency of the facts bring about more deliberate actions guided by planning based on participation and

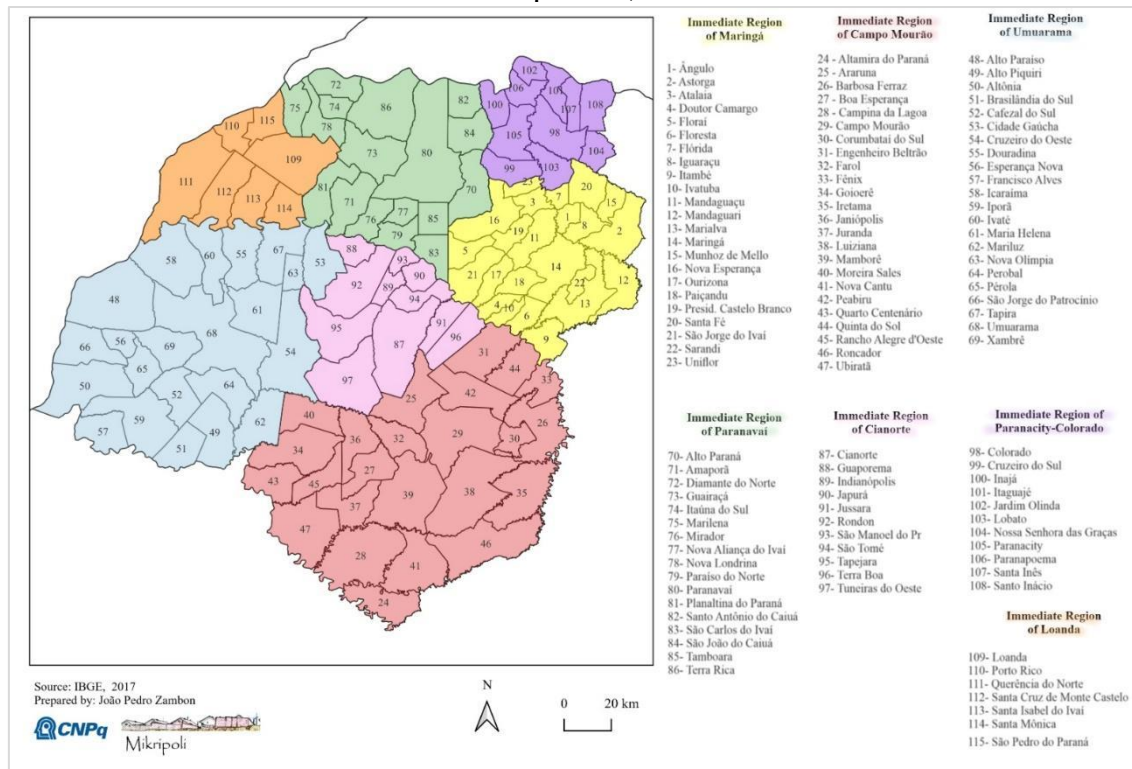
¹ In Brazil, according to the IBGE (2023), 57% of the population lives in municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, and approximately 11% live in municipalities with between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. The rest, which would consist of what we are considering small towns/localities, are home to around 32% of the population as a whole.

² We have adopted the term mikripolitan to refer to areas polarized by small towns/localities, especially those far from metropolitan areas and urban agglomerations; the proposal to adopt this term comes from the network of small-town researchers - Mikripoli.

transparency? What trends can be observed from the reality of small towns/localities? Guided by these questions, the article's main objective was to reflect on the prospects of small towns/localities in the face of contemporary obstacles.

The Intermediate Region of Maringá, the territorial focus of analysis for this article (Image 1), is the spatial reference for these reflections. Until the 1970s³, it was a region with a more compartmentalized land structure, intense use of labor in the fields to grow coffee, and the work of real estate companies (supported by the government of Paraná) that developed the countryside and created numerous urban centers. These developments acted as a support for the dense population, and therefore functioned as central locations, where the minimum supply for survival took place. However, a series of events changed this whole arrangement. The instability resulting from Brazil's insertion as a space that obeyed the agenda imposed by the international market; the Brazilian policies that concerted these interests (eradicating coffee plantations and encouraging the production of oilseeds, especially soya); the constant difficulty of small-scale production in a country of large estates; the adoption of agriculture considered modern, based on mechanization and little use of human labor are some of the points that help to understand the demographic decline and other transformations. These are aspects of the regional reality that have been better developed in other works on the area. Our goal is to recall these facts in order to explain why we have challenges that are socio-spatial and how they are linked to the numerous small towns/localities that characterize the region.

Image 1 – Maringá Intermediate Region. Location, Immediate Regions and Municipalities, 2017



³ The formation of the region, as a scale of effective capitalist occupation, took place mainly from the 1940s onwards in the area where Maringá is located, although the same agents were already at work in Londrina and other parts of the region. The main changes, however, took place in the 1970s.

In order to systematize the current challenges, we have developed three sections. In the first, we refer to reflections on the Brazilian urbanization process and small towns/localities in a context that minimally considers issues brought about by the pandemic. Subsequently, we address the challenges peculiar to geographically peripheral areas, especially municipalities polarized by small towns/localities in contexts where demographic decline persists. We try to analyze this socio-spatial reality with the support of indicators such as GDP per capita, as opposed to the Gini index, which helps to measure socio-spatial inequalities. Finally, we outline some perspectives, bringing ideas and considerations from authors who are also looking for ways to tackle contemporary obstacles. We understand that this is an exercise intended, albeit modestly, to provide a glimpse of possibilities.

2 Small towns/localities in the context of the Brazilian urbanization process

A few years ago, it would not have occurred to us to ask whether urbanization trends would continue. Projections were certainly pointing towards an increasingly urban world. However, the pandemic experienced between 2020 and 2022 has caused changes that are perhaps not yet sufficiently measured and understood. According to Santos (1996), the inversion of the place of residence of the Brazilian population, from rural to urban, occurred gradually from 1940 to 1980, from a quarter of the urban population to three quarters forty years later (Table 1). Data from 2010 shows that Brazil's average urbanization rate was already close to 85%. We'll have to wait a little longer to see if this rate continues to rise when the 2022 Census is published, so that we can update and try to advance our understanding of the spatial inclinations to come.

Table 1 – Brazil Total population, urban population and urbanization rate, 1940-2010

Year	Total population	Urban population	% urbanization
1940	41.326.000	10.891.000	26,35
1950	51.944.000	18.783.000	36,16
1960	70.191.000	31.956.000	45,52
1970	93.139.000	52.905.000	56,80
1980	119.099.000	82.013.000	68,86
1991	150.400.000	115.700.000	77,13
2000	169.544.443	137.697.439	81,2
2010	190.732.694	160.879.708	84,34

Source: IBGE. Adapted from Santos (1996).

The 2022 demographic census has made it possible to update the total population of the region to 1,914,553, but it has not been possible to complete the other items in the table in terms of the absolute and relative size of the urban population. The data as a whole shows that it was in the 1970s that the Brazilian population became more urban than rural. On a global scale, the 50% figure was surpassed much more recently, in 2008. However, the fact that the Brazilian population has been concentrated in urban areas for longer does not mean that it has remained static. On the contrary, the constant decline in the total population of

municipalities whose urban headquarters are small towns/localities⁴ shows that not only has the urbanization process advanced in recent decades, but that it has materialized in a qualitatively differentiated way, predominantly in metropolitan urban concentrations, but also in secondary level concentrations (PONTES, 1983), especially medium-sized cities, but also medium-sized cities or regional centers.

These concentrations, which are shaped not only by vegetative growth but by the arrival of migrants, have another face: a peripheral urban Brazil, polarized by small towns/localities, which is experiencing an insistent demographic decline. The population flow reveals the infeasibility of human and social reproduction of life in the areas of origin. Although part of this influx is made up of young people in search of training and better jobs, the bulk of the population is made up of workers looking for opportunities to generate income or employment.

This process consists of the spatial materialization of the logic of the capitalist production of space, because at the same time as the population concentrates labor in certain spaces, it frees up the countryside for the large expanses of agricultural production demanded by the industrial and financial logic. It's true that the Brazilian reality presents diverse spaces that provide counterpoints to these economic and demographic inclinations. However, it is also true that this assertion applies throughout a wide range of Brazilian territory.

Therefore, thinking about spatiality based on the human and social condition/quality of life, as well as the sustainability that is so demanded in its different meanings, implies seeking, from a planning perspective, to reverse the trend towards spatial concentration that has been pointed out. It's a question of at least guarantee the viability of life in small towns/localities and recognizing the potential which exists in these places for the necessary change of course.

The population's search for larger, quieter spaces during the pandemic should be taken into account. Although this has only been a viable search for professionals who work from home or are retired, this reality indicates possible changes in previous perspectives.

In this article, we have tried to articulate the issues that have been identified in relation to small towns/localities⁵, especially their general invisibility, peculiarities and economic difficulties, with those that have emerged during the pandemic. The challenges of municipalities polarized by small towns/localities from a demographic, economic and political perspective have been accentuated by urbanization. However, in addition to these challenges, there are the more recent ones and the uncertainties of the post-pandemic future, which are added to the re-created economic instability and, above all, the disquiet over the environmental and energy emergency without sufficient action to reverse it.

⁴ As an example, we cite the case of Paraná, which according to the IBGE's 2021 population estimate indicated that of the 399 municipalities, 180 have lost their total population. Of these, only one is a medium-sized city, Foz do Iguaçu. All the others can be considered as municipalities polarized by small towns/localities.

⁵ When we refer to small towns/localities we intend to cover a wide range of urban centers, those that have enough attributes to be considered cities, but also those that don't have the minimum complexity (SANTOS, 1979), but with similar challenges. For this reason, we have not set a minimum demographic limit, but we have considered 50,000 inhabitants as the upper demographic limit to be considered small towns.

It is worth remembering that small towns in Brazil are numerous and diverse. There are many sites and geographical situations. We have cited a few examples in order to show that, regardless of where they are, they are places that demand attention. Small towns incorporated into metropolitan areas or agglomerations generally experience intense demographic growth, territorial implications, and the de-characterization of their landscape and historical heritage. Coastal or other tourist towns with a large number of secondary residences, economic seasonality and insecurity due to the number of visitors circulating through them. The existing challenges depend on these peculiarities.

Due to the unusual condition that the pandemic has brought, there were many reflections during this period, expressed in debates via lives, many materialized in collections or periodic publications⁶. Several contributions focused on human spatiality in several of its aspects, for example, how to produce healthier spaces? Faced with the risks of using public transport, there were several reflections aimed at increasing an urban form that requires less physical travel and/or that favors active mobility, through cycling and walking. This is how the "15-minute city" proposal was disseminated, recovering ideas that value proximity. However, it seems that this debate has been concentrated in large and medium-sized cities. Small towns and cities were the focus of the debate during this period, mainly because of concerns about the lack of health facilities and services. However, in the areas where these cities predominate, in reality a large part of the Brazilian territory, it is also necessary to think about intra-urban mobility, public transport and the forms of urban settlement that have been taking shape.

The following dynamics need to be considered for these areas:

- ✓ The concentration of work in larger cities in the urban network, as well as in industrial plants, intensifies flows, largely supplied by public transport with interurban circuits. In other words, the same concern that exists within a metropolis also applies to this interurban dynamic, with the difficulty or impossibility of these journeys being carried out in the active mode, as proposed for intraurban areas.
- ✓ The loss of centrality of small towns in general has intensified this need to travel in order to meet basic needs. This has occurred due to the logic of commerce that has been structured at a regional level with large commercial areas: wholesales, shopping malls, various specialized stores such as huge pet stores and household appliances.
- ✓ The regional tertiary concentration does not only apply to the private tertiary sector, since the public tertiary sector has also been organized in a complementary way on the scale of the urban network, with only basic and essential services remaining in small towns/localities. However, especially in the field of health, this has proved to be quite complex with the mobility controls and barriers imposed in recent years by the health issue. On the other hand, even when access was maintained, travel involved taking risks using public transport, especially for the poorest.

⁶ The latter even had new formats that became widespread during this period, such as preprints, which shortened the usual rites of scientific publishing, with the aim of allowing ideas to be exposed in a first version more quickly.

The peculiarities of small towns in terms of the quantitative and qualitative absence of what is needed for health care may have led to care strategies being expanded, especially in some municipalities: barriers, isolation requirements and monitoring of identified cases, among others.

The logic of the urban and territorial network that we are familiar with stems from the spontaneity generated by concentrating economic dynamics and a centralizing state, much more than from something deliberate and the result of territorial planning. It is this logic that leaves the inhabitants of the many small towns in a relationship of strong dependence on the other localities in the urban network. It is the result of a territorial division of labor that takes place at regional level. Therefore, the blockages due to health issues should have cast doubt on this logic. However, it seems that after overcoming the major difficulties of the pandemic period, it will remain unchanged.

Thinking about a less fragile world, from the perspective of small-town dwellers, would imply thinking of greater proximity in meeting the needs of the population? How could this be possible, given that the existence of commercial establishments and private tertiary services can only be maintained if there is sufficient demand? As for public services, although they do not have to and should not follow the same economic rationale, it is equally desirable, in view of the use of public resources, that services can be offered at regional level, often as a result of inter-municipal cooperation.

On both a global and regional scale, we have so far lived in a world with an intense division of labor and the specializations that result from it, including regional and local productive specializations. Such a world makes its spaces mutually complementary and therefore dependent, even though political and economic commands generate subordination between them. On a global scale, there have been difficulties in obtaining various medical items at different times. This makes us rethink what is strategic and should therefore be accessible at a regional or even local level. The demands and difficulties experienced in this period should promote a new reflection on sustainability and viability, moving away from just financial criteria and valuing those related to survival and, therefore, more appropriate from a human and social perspective (ENDLICH, 2020).

What is certain in this period is that everything must be questioned and reviewed. In other words, the right thing is to recognize uncertainties. It is about letting doubts come to the agenda and be debated. However, we have observed that the quick attachment to the so-called new normal or the desire to hastily return to the usual abnormality, so that everything can reproduce itself again, ignoring and denying the open instabilities, tends to remove everything that can be questioned from the scene of reflection.

3 Socio-spatial challenges: particularities of geographically peripheral small towns/localities

The interpretation of the particularities of the region in its configuration and subsequent transformations brings what we call socio-spatial challenges. Returning to the reflections presented in the introduction, we understand socio-spatial challenges to be the specific social challenges of certain spaces, such as those listed

for small towns/localities, especially those that are spatially and economically peripheral. Although all small towns/localities should be the subject of research, these peripheral ones have the greatest difficulty in being reproduced as spaces of social life, as they have trouble maintaining their population.

In the context of political centralization and economic concentration, creating conditions for the population to remain in more dispersed, non-metropolitan areas has been a major challenge, not just in Brazil, but around the world. Various interlocutors demonstrate this reality, such as in the United States (WUTHNOW, 2013) and Australia (COLLITS, 2020), for example. In the case of Spain, there is even a literary production that addresses this issue, such as *La España Vacía* (MOLINO, 2016) and *Los últimos* (CERDÁ, 2017). In Argentina, the theme of the pueblos that disappear is also very much on the agenda (BENITEZ, 2009 and TETAMANTI, 2009).

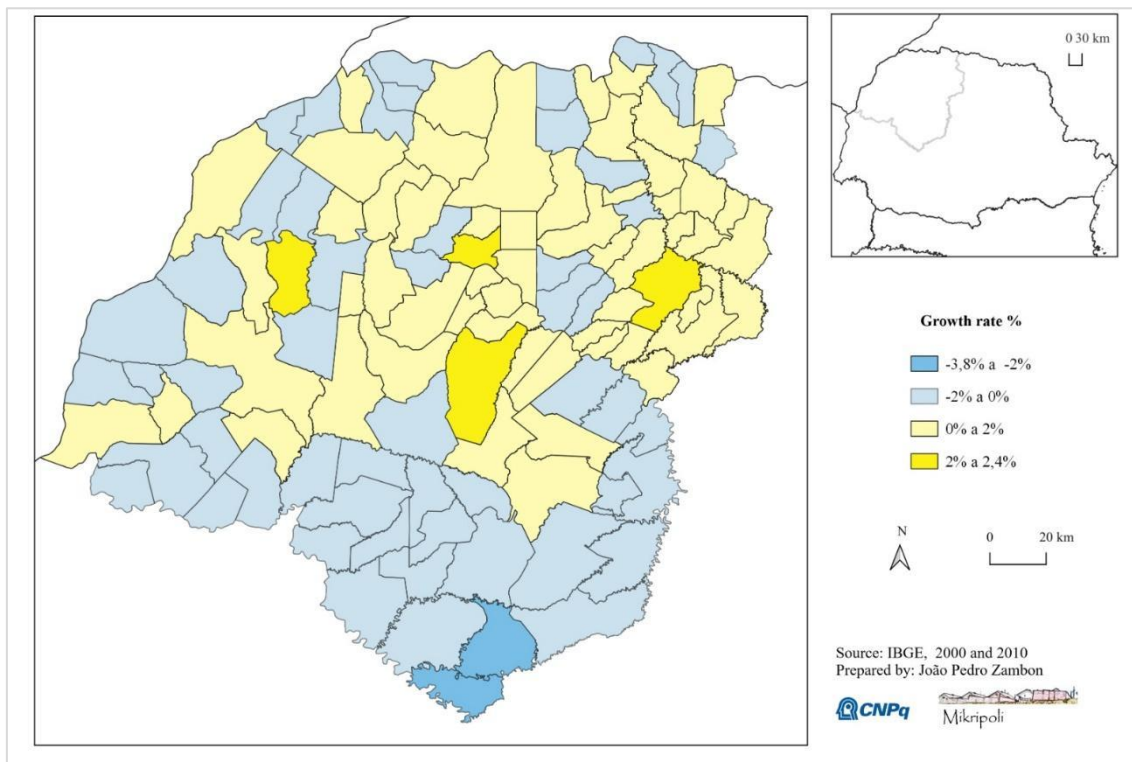
We have been following this trend and are making these records motivated by an analysis of the reality of the northern region of Paraná. In Image 2, we systematize the data for the Intermediate Region of Maringá, with 115 municipalities. The period represented consists of the calculation of population change between 2000-2010. The yellow shades on the map represent positive population growth rates, while the blue shaded classes indicate municipalities that lost population. There are a total of 54 municipalities, 46% of the region's total.

Although municipalities with this trend are found throughout the region, it is clear that they are concentrated in the south region, especially in the immediate regions of Campo Mourão (with 24 municipalities, 21 of which have a declining population) and part of the immediate region of Umuarama (with 22 municipalities, 13 of which have a declining population). However, this process is also significant in the Immediate Region of Paranavai (out of 17 municipalities, six have lost population).

One factor that may help to understand population loss, especially in the Campo Mourão Immediate Region, which has the highest number of municipalities losing population, is that agricultural policies have been selective and have prioritized medium and large producers. This land ownership structure is being established in an intense and accelerated manner. Marked by a significant number of small rural establishments, in the 1970s it became home to soya and wheat crops based on the technological production process resulting from the modernization of agriculture. In this context, small farms quickly lost ground to large rural properties (HESPANHOL, 1990). This situation of land concentration continues to persist. This sets the stage for the emptying out of small municipalities, which lose population in search of jobs and income in medium-sized and larger cities as a direct or indirect result of this process.

Population loss is therefore a challenge for the various municipalities in the region, whose urban centers are predominantly small towns. This challenge reveals others, which we have been trying to draw attention to, and which are linked to making life viable in these locations by generating adequate income and employment opportunities, as well as providing public and private services.

Image 2 – Maringá Intermediate Region. Total population growth rate, 2000-2010



Source: Organized by the authors.

With the difficulties faced by small towns, the right not to migrate is not honored (TETAMANTI, 2009). The responses to the resistance of these localities, mainly coming from the state, are disorganized and fragmented in actions that, when not thought through together, hardly respond to the problems experienced locally. The actions of the state (and even their absence) end up determining the production of space in a movement that often accentuates the existing contradictions. It is necessary, however, not to lose sight of the fact that the state must explicitly fulfill its role by redistributing wealth; reconciling the objectives of different social segments; maintaining a balance between social, economic and ecological objectives; stimulating local development, among others (SAMPAIO, 2004).

In order to be able to reproduce life in small towns/localities, territorial policy cannot be that which is implicitly and spontaneously forged by economic logic. What is needed is a deliberate intervention that recognizes these spaces as relevant in their various aspects and, above all, as human and social spaces. In this sense, as well as making it economically feasible for people to stay, we need to promote an articulation that broadens the cultural links between these areas. Only in this way it would be possible to keep the young population in Brazil so that they do not have to reinforce the large migratory flow in search of opportunities and can change their places and not their location in order to survive or have access to a more adequate life.

Analytical perspectives focused on planning, management and regional development need to address these challenges. Not to do so is to act without considering relevant aspects of reality, which will always result in insufficient planning documents. We need to advance the agenda of regulatory urbanization. We

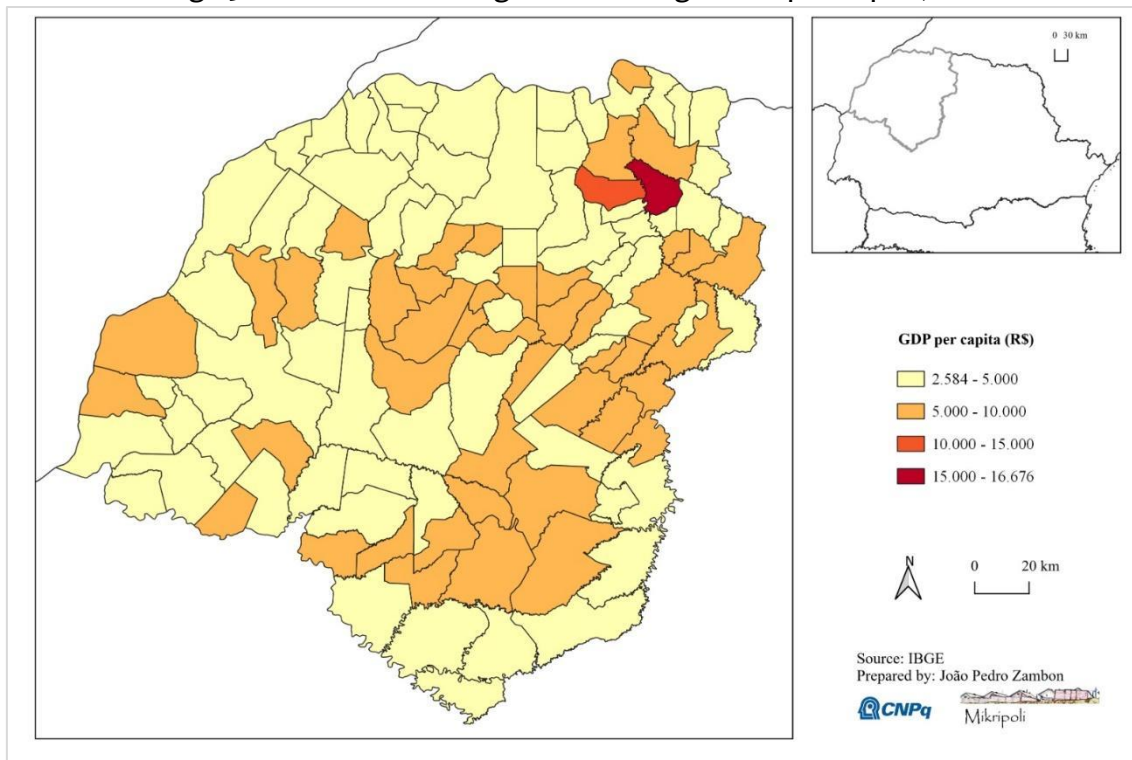
need to think of the city as a meeting place, whereas it becomes unfeasible when thought from the point of view of rational planning, because individuals are not objects, they are subjects (LEFEBVRE, 2016).

In order to better understand the reality of the region and the various municipalities polarized by small towns/localities, we contrasted the data on wealth generation with the variables of GDP/per capita per municipality with the Gini Index, which helps to understand social inequalities. Before analyzing the two types of data, we will look at their evolution in the region's territory over different periods.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) refers to the total of goods and services produced, equivalent to the sum of the values added by the various economic activities plus taxes, net of subsidies. GDP per capita is calculated by dividing GDP by the number of inhabitants in a given area. It can be measured by countries, states, regions and municipalities. GDP per capita is measured on the basis of how much of the GDP would go to each individual in an area if they all received equal shares. It is therefore an average (IPEA, 2023a).

For this study, we used the GDP per capita calculated by municipality and published by the IBGE (2023), taking into account the national and state parameters when analyzing the data for municipalities in their regions. This data is significant for measuring economic development, but remember that the average can be considered fictitious. In other words, it cannot show social inequality in isolation, which is why we also used the Gini Index, which will be presented below. In this sense, we begin by showing the GDP per capita data for the region for 2020 (Image 3).

Image 3 – Intermediate Region of Maringá. GDP per capita, 2000



Source: Organized by the authors.

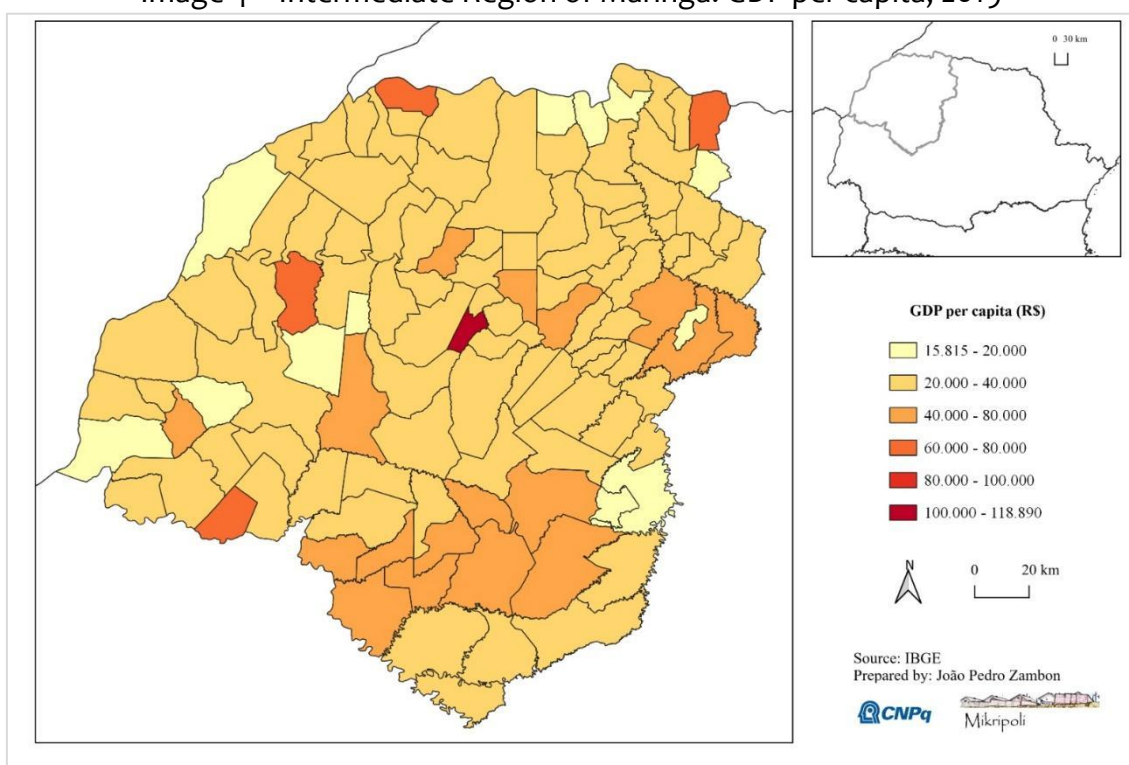
The Image 3 shows the data for 2019. The classes of the GDP per capita representations were defined according to the quartile of each year represented.

When reading the maps, it is not enough to simply interpret the colors, but to check the values by the legend⁷, while in 2000 the lowest value was 2,584 reais/per capita and the last class had the highest value of 16,676 reais, 2019 has the lowest value for the first quartile at 15,815 reais and the highest, in the last quartile, at 118,890 reais. Let's look at the average Brazilian data for the same range of years. For 2000 the average GDP per capita was R\$6,900.62; for 2019 it was R\$35,161.70. In other words, there was also a large nominal variation in the data for broader scales, such as the national one mentioned above, and we can see that for Paraná as well.

For Paraná, the average GDP per capita in 2000 was R\$7,649.00 and the average value in 2019 was R\$40,789.00. Looking at the Image 4, the most frequent range is that of average income between R\$20,000 and R\$40,000 in average GDP per capita. However, several municipalities have much higher values, even reaching values above 100,000 reais in average annual GDP per capita. On the other hand, several municipalities have values lower than the national average.

There has been a notable increase in nominal values, which does not really mean a concrete increase in the same proportion due to inflation and other possible monetary variations. However, in the period covered it was lower than it is today, which means that there has been considerable progress in the production of wealth.

Image 4 – Intermediate Region of Maringá. GDP per capita, 2019



Source: Organized by the authors.

In no municipality in the region has there been a reduction in this regard, in other words, the accumulation of capital has increased considerably. Whether it has been drained or not is another point that should be analyzed, but we will not do so

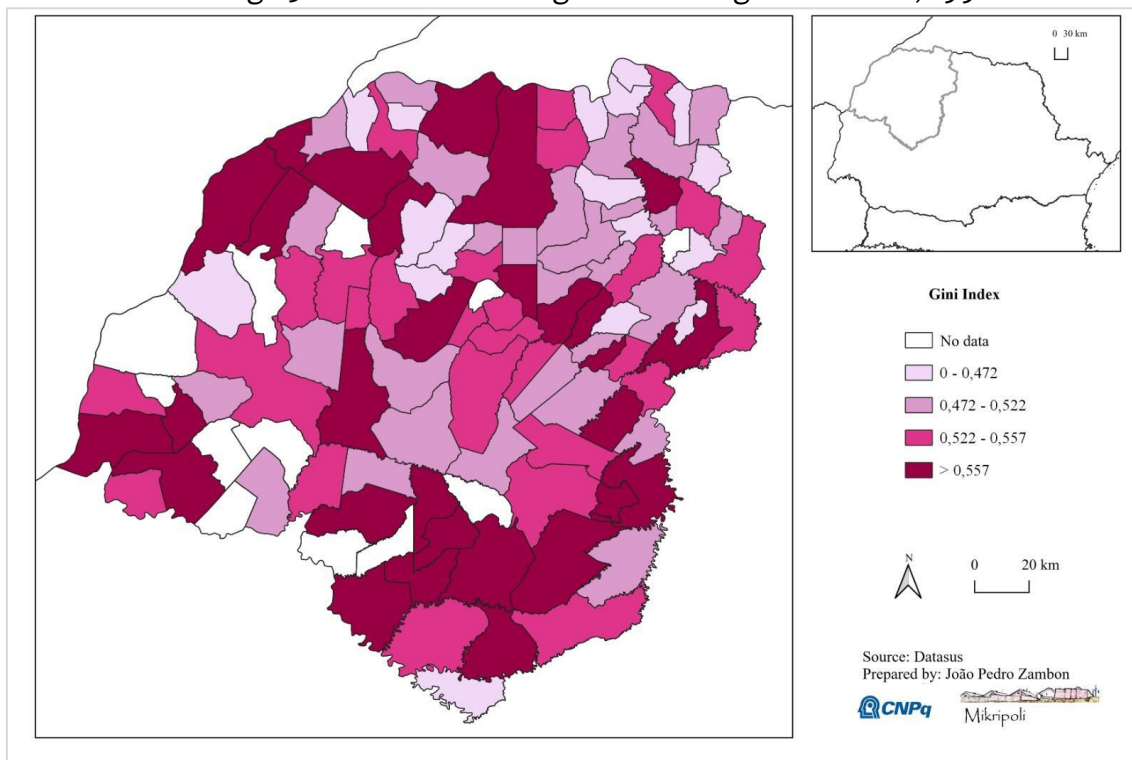
⁷ The creation of classes occurred based on the smooth breaks allowed by QGIS because there was a very large variation in the data. It was the way found to try to better reflect the data.

here, even though it is known that the urban network has drainage mechanisms in operation, which are certainly present in the regional reality (CORRÊA, 1994).

The GDP per capita allows us to grasp part of the economic reality of the municipalities that make up the region, but as we said before, it alone does not show social inequality. To this end, the Gini Index makes a significant contribution. This index was created to measure inequality, used mainly for income, but has also been used to measure land concentration. In this case, we are using it for income, which was obtained from the Datasus database (2022). It consists of a number between 0 and 1, where 0 corresponds to complete equality and 1 corresponds to complete inequality (IPEA, 2004).

In the region under analysis, there has generally been a decrease in the index, which means less inequality, although some municipalities are always exceptions. The Image 5 shows the data for 1991.

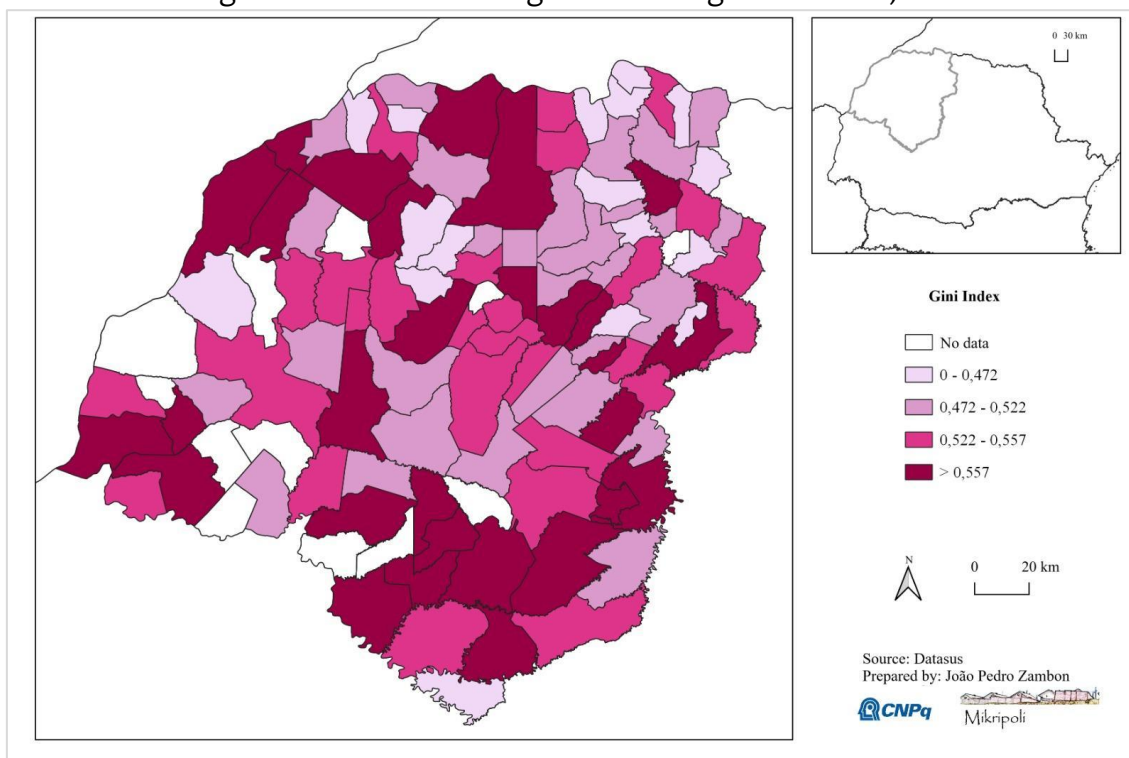
Image 5 – Intermediate Region of Maringá. Gini Index, 1991



Source: Organized by the authors.

The variation in the Gini index in a municipality can be a result of the implementation of national policies, but also from local facts and policies. For example, municipalities where settlements have taken place seem to have improved their indices. The Image 6 shows the data for this index for 2010.

Image 6 – Intermediate Region of Maringá. Gini Index, 2010.



Source: Organized by the authors.

We observed a notable amelioration of social inequalities for most municipalities. In these maps we keep the classes established by the quartile of the first year represented in order to better understand the variation over time and in the different municipalities.

We invite the reader to carefully observe the spatiality of the data presented from the representation of population growth rates (Image 2) and the representations of GDP per capita data (Image 3 and Image 4) and the Gini Index data (Image 5 and Image 6). We can clearly see a relationship between the south of the region where demographic decline persists, good indices in terms of GDP per capita that demonstrate that it is not an economically poor region, but one that is not socially inclusive. It is noteworthy that the same area of the region for which it stands out with high GDP per capita data is also the one that stood out the most with high social inequality indices with the Gini Index and where there is also a demographic decline.

Such data make us reflect on the fact that many localities are at a crossroads having their territories as a necessary target for capitalist accumulation in that “[...] the 'exclusion' 'they lived cannot be maintained and the' inclusion' of the territory can mean the end of these communities” (CARVALHAL, 2009, p.106). In the development model, which places the priority and ultimate goal in financial results, either local communities integrate into this model or its production and reproduction become practically unviable. However, its inclusion does not mean its full development improving the local quality of life because “the great socio-spatial challenges within a region often do not arise from a lack of investment or lack of capital. It can even be the other way around, with a capital-intensive economy that is not very inclusive as a generator of income and work.” (ENDLICH, 2021, P.101).

The existence of small localities and their communities ends up being in itself resistance to the logic of capital. In this logic, they either present viability, or they are doomed to disappear. The life that takes place in these localities, within this perspective, is not sufficient for their maintenance if they are not incorporated into it. The actions exercised by capital adapt the subjects and places to exploitation having as some measures the deregulation of the labor market, state improvements to facilitate the installation of companies and the preparation of labor for this exploitation (CARVALHAL, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on alternatives that are not only those of being excluded from the process of capital accumulation or being included and being subordinated to this logic.

It is true that in a detailed analysis others municipalities in the region arouse attention, but we refer here to municipalities with contiguity and that stand out in the various representations presented. These data allow us to know a little more about the regional reality, but in some way, they reiterate aspects and trends that we had previously indicated in the analysis, especially when we think about these spatial dimensions from a human and social perspective. Thinking of a positive becoming, we note below a little of how the debate needs to move forward.

4 perspectives for small towns / localities

It is up to, when thinking of more sustainable human spatial settlements and with better conditions/quality of life, to consider small cities / localities as possibilities. In addition, the more effective presence of the population with proper planning can contribute to the preservation of material (natural and architectural) and intangible heritage. From where the population migrates, we observe the abandonment of many of these heritages. Similarly, in areas of intense demographic and economic concentration, significant elements in the historical and cultural perspective tend to be neglected or mischaracterized.

About this perspective Max-Neef (apud SAMPAIO, 2005) invites us to think about the “ex-before”. We live in a society where small towns/localities and their peoples crumble to make way for presumed economic advantages. Therefore, villages are abandoned (places where people were born, worked, dreamed) and, at a given moment by way of economic interests, they seek to revitalize them, rebuild them, to bring back something lost, as a way to prepare a dish, organize a party, produce a cheese, tell a story. When it is too late, when we have already lost the history of a village, we begin to miss it and play with the diversity of the former post. For Max-Neef (apud SAMPAIO, 2005) the tragedy is this, thinking about the after with certain interests instead of planning the before in order to strengthen the culture of a village. Therefore, it is necessary to think about the conception of development that is desired, the one based only on economic interest, which makes consumption the (re)manufacture after the disappearance, or the one based on the human factor that seeks the diversity of the former before and does everything possible so that it does not fall apart.

Planning implies both diagnosis but also prognosis with the increasingly difficult task of foresight and of plotting scenarios. More than ever, Capel's call seems current: "like Borges, geographers must build geographies, fabricate architectures,

and propose alternative worlds. And maybe also think about how to find the thread to help people orient themselves in the maze of the universe (...) "(CAPEL, 2001).

It is about resuming utopias, but not alienated and not guided by the current material conditions. We resume, at this point, previous analyzes that recognized among the recommendations of the New Urbanism own values of small cities, however applied in new developments while small concrete cities experience great difficulties of planning and management.

We note that the debate somehow re-presents this issue. For example, we see this when Garnier (2021, P.11) questions what presents itself as a post-urban pseudo-revolution. He is referring to a manifesto with ecological appeal and which appeared in French bookstores in 2020, according to him successfully among members of a part of the intellectual bourgeoisie. The proposal is of an urban sociability outside the big cities as a future for humanity and the planet. He refers to what appears to be a reissue of gentrification encompassing areas of the countryside and small towns/cities (FABUREL, 2020⁸). This is an author who in the face of current challenges has responded with an interpretation that refers to an anti-urban perspective and with "bitter cries about the city" (CAPEL, 2001). As we have mentioned in other moments (ENDLICH, 2009), it is not a question of apologizing to the small city/locality, but neither of incorporating the aversion to the urban, especially to large cities.

We were supported in thinking about possibilities by some editing contributions from the Journal *Crítica Urbana* (CRÍTICA URBANA, 2021). Reimundez (2021) speaks of a territorial alternative to the one spontaneously concretized by capitalist dynamics. With emphasis on the energy issue, the author exposes that the scarcity of fossil fuels will be an unprecedented challenge for capitalism, breaking the relations that support a territorial model based on concentration in some points and emptying other areas. As we pointed out before, they are faces of a concrete capitalist geography challenged not by revolutionary mobilizations, but by environmental reality, which shows the unfeasibility of maintaining this trend. The search for energy alternatives will also imply another territorial configuration, probably more dispersed.

In this perspective, various productive activities should be presented by the government as local strategies for the reintegration of demographically small municipalities, which should be evaluated according to the demands of the citizens. Such municipalities in the current processes of redefinition of the urban network, can be new expressions of centrality, through the offer of activities related to creativity, culture and tourism.

Thinking about alternative economies such as solidarity, socio-economy, social economy, among others, which provide the basis for participatory planning and encourage self-management can be outputs for small peripherals, after all, self-organization on a municipal scale is a factor of emancipation (GARNIER, 2020). These alternative economies, participatory planning and self-management can materialize in these places in many ways and in various sectors and scopes of social life. One of them is tourism, which when established participatively brings more positive than negative benefits to children (ALVES, 2018).

⁸ It came to our attention that another work by the author from the same year (*Les métropoles barbares*) talks about deurbanization (FABUREL, 2020b).

For example, in the national territory, municipalities such as Bonito - MS, a small tourist municipality that bet on the conservation of Natural Resources and concern for sustainability. Self-management is also present in the experiences of Fernando de Noronha and Prainha do Canto Verde. The community proves to be influential, the main local promoter agent, responsible for the offer of services, as well as for decision-making. In the case of Tiradentes, public investments in the recovery of cultural heritage were positive for the small city. The insistence on the role of public power in driving the development process, seems to have been the right strategy, allowing broader reaches, both in the economic and sociocultural perspective.

Public investments in the preservation of Natural Resources, Education, Culture, diversification and innovation are the ways to create a critical and active society, capable of finishing its own parameters, strategies and Development Goals. Decentralized public investments materialize the role of the state that must guarantee territorial solidarity (GARNIER, 2020).

However, it is necessary to warn of different paths, since in Tiradentes the same public investments led to real estate speculation and spatial segregation. This case teaches us that investments can bring appreciation of local assets, but isolated from a master plan of municipal development, investments can also frustrate expectations. This scenario alerts to the fact that a single socioeconomic activity alone cannot be the way out of local challenges and must be monitored in a broad and participatory manner.

Turning our eyes to the intermediate region of Maringá, we observe that movements based on alternative economies, self-management and participatory planning also emerge as perspectives for the small. Still thinking of tourism as an example, we observe the cases of local initiatives based on social entrepreneurship that seek new perspectives. Collectives such as associations, cooperatives, from the most diverse sectors present movements of local populations in search of prospects for improving the local quality of life.

Still thinking about the perspective of tourism, which is part of the research produced to think about the region, we identified in the municipality of Astorga, for example, an organization of women artisans, who in an associative way, are building a tourism project. The movement is designed to generate income, bring affirmation of local culture and make visible the work of women. In Altônia, the tourism project "*Caminho das Paineiras*" aims to combine the preservation of the Natural Resources of the Xambrê Lagoon, in the Ilha Grande National Park, and the work of local family farmers who maintain the tradition of coffee production. Both projects of small municipalities have the self-management of communities and social entrepreneurship as basic points. The self-managed local movements that propose to seek alternatives of life in small towns / localities, exercise "[...] the municipality as the first link in the exercise of popular sovereignty [...]" (GARNIER, 2020, p. 14).

These are perspectives that put small cities more concretely on the agenda. There are many questions and possibilities. In a positive scenario, let's say that small cities can be part of a more coherent spatiality, without deconstructing a positive reference about the urban, but as part of it. This statement in no way detracts from what is understood as rural while some values that leave us missing (proximity to

nature, greater slowness in everyday life, strengthening ties of sociability). However, all of this may be part of a new urban perspective.

In this sense, there are several factors that bring concerns, among which the pandemic condition is one of them. With several similar reflections, The Journal *Crítica Urbana* points out the need to debate and establish limits to growth (CRÍTICA URBANA, 2021). Environmental challenges associated with social ones require transformations. Not only the climate issue (OLCINA CANTOS, 2021), but also the energy issue (REIMUNDEZ, 2021) brings many concerns. There are several contributions in this thematic publication as a whole, both in raising significant issues and in signaling perspectives, in this text we have selected only a few points.

In this publication we find proposals that have some convergence, especially regarding the criticism of the exaggerated extension of cities, resulting in the words of Calo Garcia (2021), from an urbanizing tsunami, or a pathological drift from a neoliberal-inspired real estate model. Contrary to long-standing theoretical and technical reflections: dispersed and with negative implications on the territory with the highest consumption of energy, water, polluting emissions, compromise of rural space, in addition to other equally negative implications on the dynamics of the cities themselves: increased traffic, commuting, segregation (CALO GARCIA, 2021). Regarding the exaggerated extension of cities, it should be noted that small cities in metropolitan areas and urban agglomerations also undergo similar processes. Fundamental questions that should also be problematized in other works.

In convergence Mora (2021) proposes to plan with the existing, in contrast to the practice interested only in producing space by extension. It is a planning that values the existing, the patrimonial heritage and its physical and social bases. The aforementioned authors think on an intra-urban scale, but we think when working with these themes that the reflection also applies to the urban scale and small cities.

We return to considerations that need to be considered when thinking about development. In this sense, we recall reflections, pointed out by Barquero (2000), in which he highlights the complexity that the term development assumes when adjectives such as endogenous, local and human are attributed to it.

Human development, in addition to the various endogenous and economic aspects common to the various conceptualizations, surpasses other interpretations by placing man as the main beneficiary of socio-economic transformation efforts and by attributing to citizens the ability to freely choose local projects, their life projects. Such conceptions, by placing local demands as individual, deny the existence of a globally established linear process of common stages of development, which although so fought, still circulate. Therefore, the development of a locality must depend on the efforts, resources and decisions of its residents and be measured by their particular demands (VARISCO, 2008). Society must assume the role of leading the planning and execution of the economic future (BARQUERO, 2007).

The aforementioned role of society is not in the sense of holding residents accountable for the success or failure of the development strategies adopted, but in the sense of establishing dialogues and understanding of local demands and empowering participation and charging Society for the investment of public resources aimed at social distribution of local gains and social welfare. Socio-spatial

challenges must be considered when developing an action plan, a territorial policy that must contain social concerns.

Regional Development presupposes minimum conditions for municipal organization, which does not happen in the municipalities studied, which do not have financial resources, nor human resources for tourism management. Such fragility of public tourism management makes it easy for private initiative to present itself as the main agent and beneficiary of municipal economic development, which happens, in particular, according to the interests of real estate agents.

While many urban headquarters and their historically produced areas go through difficulties many new developments and condominiums arise. Many proposing urbanities reminiscent of the environmental and social amenities of small towns. At this point we recover reflections that we made when thinking of the formulations of capitalist utopias with values to the detriment of already existing cities. Would it not also fit on this scale to plan with the existing one?

When the science of foresight becomes more difficult, that is when it will be even more necessary. This is because the absence of planning and containment actions of the processes that triggered the chaos could mean total collapse. It is necessary that the actions foreseen, and which must erupt immediately, no longer allow the reproduction of the same. In addition, society will need to learn to deal with the long term, because the time lapse between the action and its results will make this imposition.

5 Conclusions

Considering that our central objective has been to build reflections on the perspectives of small cities/localities in the face of contemporary obstacles, we observed in this research that the challenges previously existing are added to others exposed in recent years. In the midst of so many reflections, we observe that some proposals reissue anti-urban, partial and elitist perspectives. It is necessary to be attentive, because such discourses argue incorporating in discourses values that are difficult to disagree with such as: the need to consider other areas of the territory, environmental issues, cooperation and self-management, etc.

In this sense, it seems pertinent to consider that there are potentialities in small cities that can contribute to the production of a more human, socially less unequal and environmentally more sustainable socio-spatial reality. As Milton Santos provokes us, the order that is imposed by a dominant rationality is not superior and “the question, for us, would be to discover and put into practice new rationalities, at other levels and regulations more consistent with the desired order, desired by men, where they live” (SANTOS, 2008, p.154).

Despite the long list of limitations imposed on small municipalities in the region and the various challenges to overcome, we identified experiences from other parts of Brazil, which are inspiring for actions in the region and, we present local actions that go in the direction of these experiences as a perspective for the small intermediate region of Maringá.

The positive implications seem to be more evident where there is valorization and protection of natural and cultural attractions, and where tourism management is based on planning and social participation, articulating public, private and

organized civil society agents. However, we emphasize that there is no economic activity capable of bringing only positive results.

The growth or decline of an economic activity has profound implications for the living conditions of residents of municipalities with a small demographic size. Therefore, the development of small municipalities is a phenomenon that requires the attention of researchers, managers and communities involved. The expansion and maturation of the studies will bring greater detail to the analysis of the capacity to respond to socioeconomic challenges, indicating the scope and limits of the development strategies adopted in municipalities of small demographic size and their urban headquarters.

These seem to be some of the most fundamental questions for the contemporary world. However, this cannot ignore the gulf between the possibilities signaled for small towns in utopian ideals and the reality found in many of them.

In the same way, one should not ignore the plurality represented by the various small cities and their demands, especially as human and social spaces. Research and debate can bring contributions to advance adequately, including so that the different challenges are overcome.

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